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ABSTRACT

Teaching poetry and fiction writing is most effective in classes where the student population is heterogeneous. The experienced writers help the beginners improve and the beginners provide a critical audience for the more advanced writers. Diversity in age and worldliness challenges the creative writing instructor to provide the opportunity for all the different perspectives and kinds of writing to emerge and provides a healthy, motivating atmosphere for student writers. Creative writing classes provide the real-life environment that can motivate students with writing weaknesses to practice and master the basics of grammar, spelling, and punctuation. The broader audience confronting the student whose writing will be read by a diverse class also motivates the student to write so that those with different perspectives and experiences will understand. Anthology readings successfully establish a common ground of understanding that prevents alienation of students from each other, and exposes them to different writing techniques and styles. The most successful grading policy in a diverse creative writing class is one of lengthy written comments on papers and letter grades based on consistent participation and completion of assignments. (HTH)

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WRITING: DIFFERENT MOTIVATIONAL APPROACHES

The art of writing fiction and poetry can be taught to everyone, and is most effective in classes where the student population is heterogeneous. This heterogeneity manifests itself in the students' age and experience in the world, motivation, acquaintance with the craft of writing and with the standard rules of grammar and composition.

Those students who have poor writing skills improve remarkably when they write about something they care about and which the other members of the class will read. Students vary in their reasons for taking a creative writing class: some have never written; others have, and want to improve. The experienced writers help the beginners and the beginners provide a critical audience for the more advanced writers. This diversity aids in establishing a healthy, humble environment of experimentation in which the students' writing is shared. Differences in age and worldliness in the creative writing class create the ideal audience for the writer who is, therefore, not writing for himself or herself, or for a small group of admirers, but for a realistically diverse group. These situations can be seen as challenges to the creative writing instructor, who must provide the opportunity for all the different perspectives and different kinds of writing to emerge in this heterogeneous environment. This diversity provides a healthy, motivating atmosphere for the student writer.

While populations of highschool, two-year and four-year colleges may be less diverse in composition classes, it is probably true that the heterogeneity to which I am referring exists in creative writing classes at all levels of secondary and higher education. It may seem that the degree of variation in the students' ability to simply write coherently would be the most difficult problem to surmount in a class which requires students to write entire short stories or poems. Students who dislike or fear writing may select themselves out of such a class, but not the student who has a real desire to express himself or herself, even if he or she doesn't have the mechanical skills to accomplish this desire. Even in elective courses such as creative writing, students with great problems in writing appear. The creative writing class or unit is not the place, of course, to teach the elements of grammatical writing. But my experience has been that those students who do desire to communicate will improve in their grammar, spelling and punctuation as a result of participating in a creative writing class. Much has been said about the difficulty of teaching expository writing in an environment in which that writing has no practical or long-range value. Creative writing classes, on the other hand, often provide the real-life environment which can motivate those students who have writing weaknesses to explore, practice and master these basics -- and they do it on their own. In a creative writing class of the kind I teach, all work is published and the audience is larger than just one person, the instructor. Each student receives a copy of each other student's

work; we use much of our class time discussing the students' work, be it a dialogue scene or a sonnet. Suddenly, the poor student writer's peers are asking him or her what this word means or why this sentence was left incomplete. If the student has any desire to be understood by others (and I believe this is an innate human characteristic) he or she will soon realize, perhaps for the first time, the advantages of grammatical, coherent writing.

Now, my premise is not that all heterogeneity or diversity within the student population in creative writing classes is eventually leveled out. This has been my experience in the area of the simple ability to compose; nevertheless, the other areas of difference -- exposure to life and motivation for writing -- are not leveled during the progress of such a class. At the college level, students in a creative writing class vary in age and maturity. This is, of course, also true for high school classes where there are always various maturity levels within one grade. Even greater diversity is found within public colleges and university creative writing sections which are usually separate courses offered within the traditional academic curriculum, and often also offered as "adult education" or "extended day" courses. My students have varied in age from 16 to over 70. And students of approximately the same age vary widely in experience in the world. I'm thinking, for instance, of the student, age 26, who is a Vietnam veteran and the student of the same age who is not and still lives at home with his or her parents.

I find this kind of diversity very healthy, particularly when the students read or present their writings to the class. Not only are we, the class as readers, exposed to stories from different generations and different perspectives, but the sixteen-year-old must learn to write so that the seventy-year-old can understand the motivations of the characters, or the theme -- and vice versa. This widening of the audience for the writer, which is originally widened when we share the writing with an entire class rather than with the instructor only, is, I believe, another motivating situation. The writer of a particular poem must be sure that the images are evocative; that the phrasing is, not necessarily simple, but understandable; that all the elements of structure, rhythm and metaphor contribute to the intended effect of the poem, since ten or twenty other people will read it. Writing evolves, therefore, from a closet exercise to one which must be carefully done, carefully scrutinized and rewritten, in order to communicate with people different from the writer. Writing is not an in-joke, to be understood by a select group. It is a communication with the world, which is represented in microcosm in the heterogeneous classroom.

Students differ, too, whether at the high school or college level, in their motivations for writing. Robert E. Moore divides up his students into four categories: people who want to be writers, people who want to write, people who do write , and people who write and have published. This has been my experience as well.

The people who want to be writers believe they would rather do that than be a waitress, drug store clerk or secretary. Those jobs make you work, after all. And there is also in this category the student who enjoys the role or pose of the writer: the meditative, sensitive human being roaming the campus thinking about words or observing people and situations which he will use in his next story. Since this kind of person has never actually written a story or poem, he too presumes that writing is easy. The activities which he equates with writing, the social, self-serving activities, are enjoyable; he does not realize that writing is hard, lonely work. Some of the students in this category will not remain in a creative writing class when they learn they must spend their time laboring over a piece of paper. But more often than not the student who thinks he or she wants to be a writer will find that, actually, the writing is enjoyable, because it is more fruitful than the pose. If this student wishes to be part of the social activities of the creative writing class, he or she must want to write. Then this student becomes part of the second category: those who want to write. This group includes people who have said, "I could write a better book than that," those people who have "so many fascinating experiences in their lives," and those who "have a wonderful story to tell if they could only find time to sit down and write it." This group also contains the student who is curious about writing, who has never had a creative

course, never written anything, but thought that it would be "fun" or "interesting." Many of these students will become successful writers and can be effectively accommodated in the class. When these students look around them in the class and see the so-called experienced writer who is actually doing what they have said they could always do better, I think it becomes a real challenge to them. They've been talking about writing for years, perhaps, but this is the first time that they have associated with a group of people who do write. The conditions are right for the first real experiments. And since the class is made up of many such beginners, the first public exposure of their tentative lines is not as frightening as they sometimes imagine.

Many participants in a creative writing class, of course, are not beginners. Some may have already written a poem for a friend's birthday, a letter to the editor of the local newspaper, or they may have reams of stories or poems in a trunk at home which no one has ever seen. As Moore says, these people are over the biggest hurdle and can benefit from the class by improving on what they already do. It is sometimes difficult to accommodate the closet writer into the classroom workshop atmosphere. Many people are motivated to write for their personal expression. Certainly this is an important and valid kind of writing. But frequently, this writer does not want or need instruction. And I do not believe in allowing students to write "only" for the instructor's eyes. I should say here that this philosophy would probably not always work

at the secondary level. My philosophy is that if the person wishes to share his or her writing with another, even with just the instructor, that he or she will find greater benefit in sharing the work with a group, especially a heterogeneous group. The shy student often finds that there are others like himself or herself among the group: that he or she is not alone. Often the closet writer seeks this one-to-one communication for the sole purpose of acquiring approval, and approval only for the work. My comment on students' work is always analytical and critical, and I would not change for the shy writer. But in the majority of instances, when the writer has given his or her poem or story to the class, the other students recognize that this person is sensitive, and will be, at first, careful and kind in their comments. If this leniency were to be the consistent condition in the classroom discussions, I would object. But a classroom made up of beginners and writers who remember when they were beginners is a very sensitive organism. The fact that, say, 15 people, rather than one person, say nice things about the sensitive writer's work is a very encouraging, new opportunity.

The students who have already written, sometimes published, do not need this discretion, of course. But they are served by the class as a forum for their work, and as a creator of the outside regimen which they may need to keep them going. Experieneced writers have told me that they have enrolled in my class

because they need the deadlines set for them and they need people to give them feedback on their work. Writers at any level of proficiency can provide a realistic audience for such people; the perceptive readers will comment on the subtlety and nuances of a poem or story, the inexperienced readers will ask those questions about things they missed in the story. The writer will then have to decide what kind of audience he or she is writing for: a more widely read or select group, or the average reader, such as most of the national magazines buy stories for. Either way the experienced writer is provided with a captive audience with which to share his or her work.

Now given, and in some cases encouraging, the diversity in the classroom, how is the creative writing class best structured to meet the needs of all students? My full scheme and curriculum is too lengthy to go into detail here, but I will touch on four areas: the reading assignments, the focus of the curriculum, the workshop discussions and the grading procedures.

In a class run as a seminar in which the students read each others' work, it is important to establish a common ground of understanding or experience so that they don't feel standoffish from each other. My sixteen-year-old and my seventy-year-old, my Vietnam veteran and my protected stay-at-home have led such different lives that they may have litte, at first, in common to talk about. Beyond the obvious reason, then,

for assigning readings from anthologies (that being that all writers should read as much as possible), I devote approximately twenty-five percent of the class and homework emphasis to the study of literature. Again, besides the fact that the exposure to the techniques and craft of published writers is significantly beneficial to any writer, the stories read in common give the class a basis of common experience. When my sixteen-year-old comments that the story written by the seventy-year-old seemed to move very slowly and didn't have enough action, I can refer the class to a story by Willa Cather or Anton Chekov, reminding them about the predominance, in those stories which we've read, of the indirect over the direct, the narrative over dialogue. If my protected twenty-six-year-old suggests that the diction or dialogue in the work written by the Vietnam veteran is harsh or pornographic, I will remind the class of the poems we have read by Creely or Sassoon. The required reading of novels, stories and poetry of writers from all the literary periods broadens their experience of the world of literature and provides the class with common points of reference. I use the Perrine anthologies, and recommend any anthology which divides the works into technical, rather than chronological or thematic units.

The writing assignments are also focused on the techniques or craft of writing. I do not give subjects or themes on which students have to write. Given my explanation of the diversity in any class population, this would be foolish. On the other hand, I do not simply allow my students to turn in poems or pieces of fiction at random, whenever they feel the piece is

ready to be read. In poetry writing classes I require my students to attempt poems in various forms, various meters, various styles. We study the sonnet form, for instance, discuss its requirements, its strengths and weaknesses. We examine Petrarch, Shakespeare, Auden, and then they are required to turn in a sonnet. In my fiction writing classes we study characterization, plotting, dialogue, narrative detail, flashback, as techniques, and then students turn in portions of a story or novel in which they have concentrated on that particular technique. Again, students may write on any subject, but I believe that a writer must learn the tools of the craft, must try out different narrative points of view,attempt both lyrical and narrative styles of poetry in order to find the style best suited to each individual needs. And by organizing the writing around these various techniques, the discussion of each poem or piece of fiction can be focused on the technique, rather than on the writer.

About fifty percent of the class time is devoted to a discussion of the writing turned in by the students. I make class copies, distribute them and the following meeting we conduct a critique of the various works. As I said, by beginning with a focus on a particular technique which all of the writers have then worked with, the class, as diverse as it is, can intelligently respond to each piece. The variety of age level, life experience and maturity is a source of much delight, rather than a hindrance ina class organized in this way. As I mentioned before, the more diverse the audience, the more critical a writer must be of his writing. There are cases, of course,

where not all readers will be able to respond appropriately to a piece of writing. Those students, for example, who write gothic or science fiction , western or mystery stories, may not find valid readers in all of their classmates since they may not all be familiar with the genre. These people can still respond, of course,to the structure, characterization, imagery and other basic elements of story-telling.

This brings me to my final explanation, which is the answer to the question: How do you grade creative writing, especially when the writers differ in ability and motivation? My answer may be somewhat unorthodox, but it is not that you don't grade them. My college operates on the letter grade system, and my course cannot be taken as an audit or pass-fail. I do not, however, put letter grades on particular pieces of writing. I do give lengthy comments on each work. I base the final course grade, then, on whether the student has or has not done all the assignments. In other words, if the student reads all the literature assigned, turns in all the writing assignments on time and participates consistently in the critique discussions, he or she receives an A in my class. If he or she turns in a writing assignment late or does not consistently participate in seminar discussions, he or she will receive a B or C. If the writer turns in only a few assignments and has evidentally not read the assigned literature or taken the time to read the works by the other students, he or she will receive a D or an F. I don't claim this is an ideal system. It does not account for the situation when one student turns in, on time, a very

uninspired and uninspiring poem, while another turns in a very well-written, engaging poem one week late. But given the choice of grading on quality or ability, which is such a subjective measure when it concerns creativity, and grading on something which is very much related to being a writer -- that is, the ability to force onself to sit down and write -- I have chosen the later. I have found that my students accept this method of determining final grades and the majority prefers it over the traditional system.

This concludes my prepared speech. I'll be happy to answer any questions at the appropriate time. Thank you.